



Low Intrinsic Christians Experience Avoidant Attachment to God Following Mortality Salience

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Abstract

Prior work has found that religious orientation can significantly impact the effects of mortality salience (MS). Building on this, the present research examined attachment to god following MS among intrinsic Christians. Christian individuals were asked to complete the Religious Orientation Scale, followed by a neutral word search puzzle that primed either death or control. The dependent variable consisted of people's attachment to god. The results revealed that although high intrinsic religiosity was associated with lower avoidant attachment in both the MS and control condition, high intrinsics experienced a lower avoidant attachment (or a more secure attachment) when primed with MS than the control condition. This study suggests that reminders of death lead individuals to bolster their internal, personal beliefs to combat existential terror.

Introduction

When reminded of death, individuals cling to their beliefs to cope with the terror associated their inevitable mortality. Intrinsic religiousness (i.e., firmly internalizing one's beliefs) buffers against existential terror and reduces the need for defense as these persons are able to rely on their internalized, religious beliefs as a shield, along with their overall relationship with their divine figurehead (Vail et al., 2012).

Other work suggests that a relationship with God can be described as an attachment bond, specifically that an anxious attachment to God is strongly correlated with an extrinsic religious orientation (Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002).

The present study examined the association between intrinsic religiosity and attachment to God. Specifically, we hypothesized that low intrinsic individuals would experience a more avoidant attachment to God following MS. High intrinsic persons, however, should be buffered due to their internalized beliefs.

Method

Following prior research (Arrowood et al., 2018; Galen, 2015), non-religious individuals were removed from all analyses.

Participants:

158 workers recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (mTurk). Only Christians were sampled due to the nature of the DV.

Materials:

The Religious Orientation Scale (Allport & Ross, 1967). Measures the level of intrinsic belief a person holds in their religion (e.g., "A primary reason for my interest in religion is that my church is a congenial social activity;" $\alpha = .91$).

Mortality Salience (Maxfield et al., 2007). Seven death words (e.g., death, death) were embedded into a word search puzzle. Neutral words were utilized in the control condition.

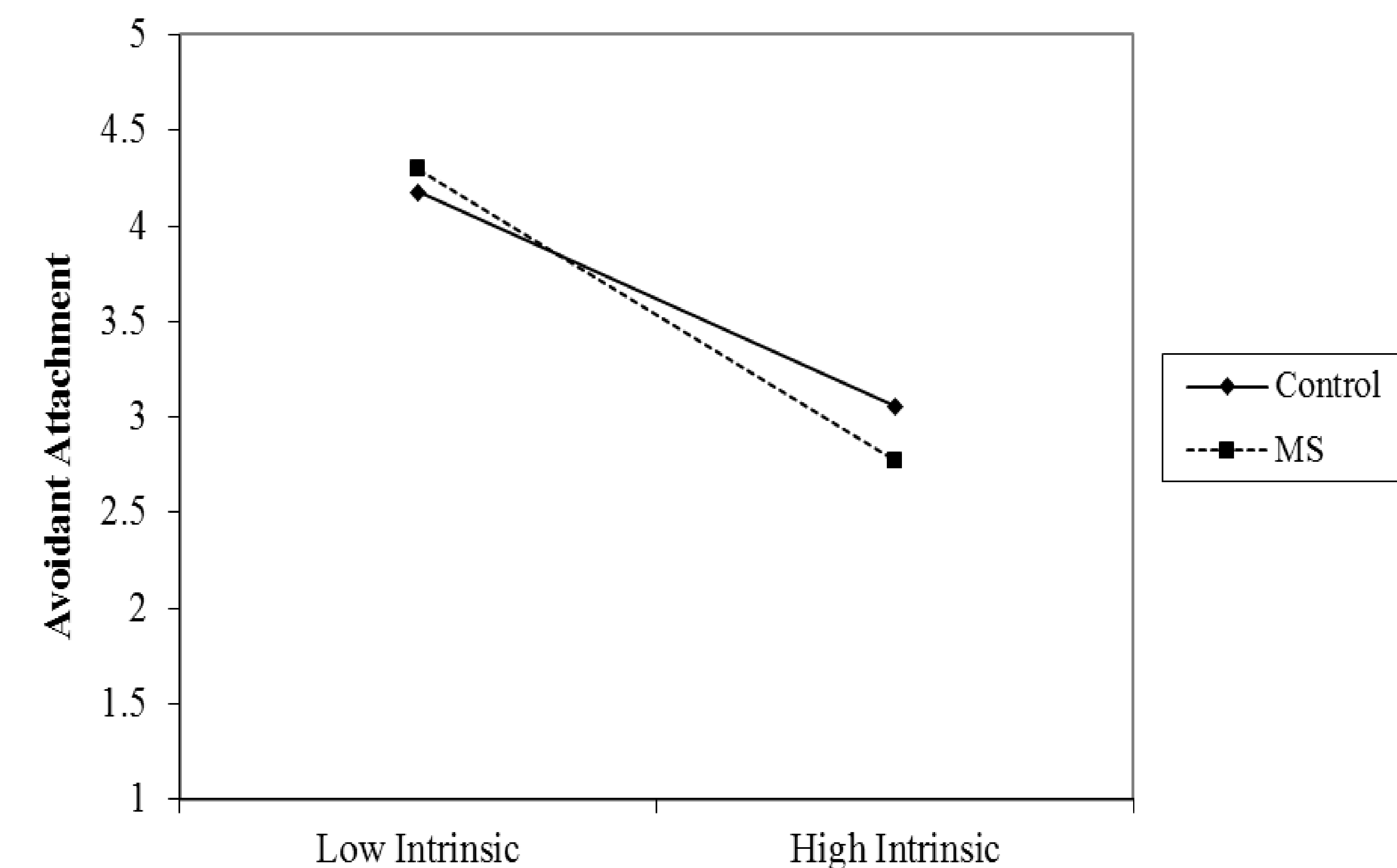
Attachment to God (Beck & McDonald, 2004). Measures the insecure attachment style (i.e., avoidant, anxious) toward God (e.g., "I just don't feel a deep need to be close to God;" $\alpha = .83$).

Results

- A marginally significant interaction between intrinsic religiosity (centered) and MS (dummy coded) on avoidant attachment, $b = -.11$ ($SE = .06$), $t = 1.73$, $p = .09$, $R^2 = .01$ (see Figure 1).
- The simple slope for both the control, $b = -.08$ ($SE = .12$), $t = 6.91$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .17$, and MS group, $b = -.42$ ($SE = .05$), $t = 9.12$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .30$, showed lower levels of avoidant attachment as intrinsic religiosity increased
- Whereas low intrinsic persons (-1 SD) did not differ as a function of MS, $b = .12$ ($SE = .17$), $t = .72$, $p = .47$, $R^2 = .002$. High intrinsic individuals (+1 SD), experienced more avoidant attachment when primed with MS, $b = -.28$ ($SE = .16$), $t = 1.72$, $p = .09$, $R^2 = .01$.

Results (cont.)

Figure 1. Avoidant attachment scores as a function of intrinsic religiosity and MS



Discussion

- These results suggest that low intrinsic people are unable to rely on their religious beliefs following MS. Specifically, because these individuals do not internalize their religiosity, their beliefs become a source of contention instead of an anxiety buffer following MS.
- These results build upon those by Jonas and Fischer (2006) by suggesting that high intrinsic persons are able to fully shield against MS because they have a strong attachment to God.
- Future work should replicate this work with different religions and gods to insure generalizability, as well as increase the overall sample size due to the marginal effects observed here.